

From Today's Editions Of The News-press

Cost rises for new schools

Lee district faces more construction issues

By Dave Breitenstein

dbreitenstein@news-press.com

Originally posted on December 24, 2005

Talk about sticker shock.

The school district is estimating its next new high school will cost \$61.2 million.

That school, set to open August 2008 in northeast Cape Coral, is \$15.1 million more than Cape's Ida S. Baker High, which just opened four months ago. It also is 46 percent higher than originally budgeted.

All that after chopping off 50,000 to 60,000 square feet from the building's planned size.

"I'm real concerned about the increase in cost of construction," Superintendent James Browder said.

Post-Katrina price increases in construction materials, labor shortages, land costs and inflation are chipping away at the school district's ability to stay afloat as enrollment surges at 5,000 new students per year.

It's not just the price tags of high schools that are shooting through the roof. School officials also confront:

- An elementary school set to open in August 2007 will cost \$24 million, \$7.4 million more than a school built from similar blueprints that opened four months ago.

- A middle school set to open in August 2007 could cost \$35.1 million, twice the price of a one christened just last year.

- East Lee County High, in the design and permitting stage for more than a year, will cost \$58.3 million — 17 percent higher than an estimate developed this summer.

The school district isn't alone in facing increasing construction costs. The price has gone up for, among others, the reconstruction of the Sanibel Causeway and an expansion of the Lee County Jail.

As long as families continue to move to Lee County, the 75,412-student school district will have to build new public schools. Just how the district will pay for those schools is a contentious issue with revenue projections on shaky ground.

School board members are expected to ratify a construction loan this spring that will push Lee's debt toward \$1

SCHOOL COST COMPARISONS

- Ida S. Baker High in Cape Coral (opened August 2005): \$46.1 million.
- High School "HHH" in Cape Coral (to open August 2008): \$61.2 million.
- Varsity Lakes Middle in Lehigh Acres (August 2004): \$17.5 million.
- Middle School "KK" in Cape Coral (August 2007) \$35.2 million.
- Harns Marsh Elementary in Lehigh Acres (August 2005): \$16.6 million.
- Elementary School "U" in Cape Coral (August 2007): \$24 million.

DELIVERING YOUR WORLD

- ▶ [Subscribe to The News-Press](#)
- ▶ [Signup for daily email news](#)
- ▶ [Printer friendly version](#)
- ▶ [Email this article](#)

..... ADVERTISEMENT

billion.

Meanwhile, a real estate boom in the county is channeling more property taxes into public schools, and on Jan. 1, the county will start collecting a higher school impact fee rate of \$4,309 for a single-family home.

This summer, the school board opted not to proceed with a ballot seeking a half-cent sales tax increase because extra money from property taxes and impact fees was expected to cover construction expenses.

That was before construction costs rose in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as construction crews and building materials were pulled from Southwest Florida.

The school district's financial and construction teams are revising enrollment growth projections, construction data and revenue estimates for a twice-annual overview.

School board members, Browder and the district's Finance Advisory Committee will analyze the information to determine whether to ask voters to raise the sales tax rate by a half-cent or seek other options such as loans for new buildings.

"We need to make sure we have good, solid assumptions in there with good data," finance committee chairman David Hall said.